

## *Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick*

*1945–*

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM MICHIGAN

*1997–*



Image courtesy of the Member

**A 20-YEAR VETERAN OF MICHIGAN STATE POLITICS**, Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1996. The first African-American woman to serve on a Michigan legislature appropriations panel, she joined the powerful House Appropriations Committee in only her second term. Representative Kilpatrick has focused on issues affecting working-class Americans, seeking federal dollars and programs to revitalize her south Detroit district.

Carolyn Jean Cheeks was born on June 25, 1945, in Detroit, Michigan, to Marvell Cheeks, Jr., and Willa Mae (Henry) Cheeks. Raised as a member of the Shrine of the Black Madonna of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church, a politically active and powerful congregation in Detroit, she eventually served as its coordinator of political action.<sup>1</sup> She graduated from the High School of Commerce in Detroit and attended Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan. Cheeks earned a bachelor of science degree in education from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo in 1972 and an M.S. in education from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor five years later. In 1968, Cheeks married Bernard Kilpatrick, and they raised two children, Ayanna and Kwame. The Kilpatricks later divorced. Early in her career, Kilpatrick worked as a teacher in the Detroit public schools. A protégé of longtime Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, she left teaching in 1978 to pursue a political career. That year Kilpatrick won election to the first of nine consecutive terms in the Michigan house of representatives, serving from 1979 to 1997. In the state house, Kilpatrick became the first African-American woman to serve on the appropriations committee. She also chaired the corrections budget for a decade and was the house Democratic whip—earning a reputation as a consensus builder.<sup>2</sup>

Kilpatrick sought election in 1996 to represent Michigan in the U.S. House. Among a large field of competitors in the Democratic party, including three-term incumbent Barbara-Rose Collins, Kilpatrick prevailed with a 19 percent margin of victory. The district, which covered the southern half of Detroit and several adjacent suburbs, was overwhelmingly Democratic; African Americans accounted for

about 70 percent of the population. In the general election, Kilpatrick captured 88 percent of the vote. In her subsequent four re-election bids, she has won by similarly large margins, despite reapportionment in 2001. In 2004, Congresswoman Kilpatrick won election to her fifth term with 78 percent of the vote.<sup>3</sup>

When Congresswoman Kilpatrick took her seat in the 105th Congress (1997–1999), she received assignments on three committees: Banking and Financial Services and House Oversight and the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress. In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), Kilpatrick won a seat on the prestigious House Appropriations Committee which required her to leave her other committee assignments. She had two key Appropriations subcommittee assignments: Transportation and Foreign Operations. An active member and second vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Representative Kilpatrick holds the distinction of being the first woman to chair the CBC's political action committee. Kilpatrick is also the first African-American Member of Congress to serve on the Air Force Academy Board, which oversees programs of the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Much of Kilpatrick's legislative work has centered on bringing federally funded projects into her district. From her seat on the Appropriations Committee, she has helped garner funding for Detroit-area projects for pre-college engineering, children's television programming, and enhanced rehabilitation services at the Detroit Medical Center.<sup>4</sup> She also supported a transportation bill that included \$24 million for an intermodal freight terminal in her district that links rail, marine, and road delivery lines.<sup>5</sup> Kilpatrick's educational efforts brought the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) engineering and aeronautics program to Michigan for students ranging from kindergarten through 12th grade.

More broadly, Congresswoman Kilpatrick has focused on issues affecting working-class Americans. She has been an outspoken advocate for affordable health care for low- and middle-income families and for raising the minimum wage. Kilpatrick also proposed legislation to provide a \$1,000 per month tax credit for medical doctors who practice in underserved areas. Representative Kilpatrick has sought to encourage corporate America and the federal government to invest more money in minority- and women-owned media outlets and advertising agencies. From her seat on the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee, Kilpatrick has brought attention to health and economic woes in sub-Saharan Africa, securing funds for flood relief in Mozambique and South Africa and for funds for AIDS orphans in several countries.

Following in his mother's footsteps, Kwame Kilpatrick succeeded Representative Kilpatrick in the Michigan house of representatives. In 2005, he won election to a second consecutive term as mayor of Detroit.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, "Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

## NOTES

- 1 "Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick," Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 2000; "Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick," *Contemporary Black Biography*, Vol. 16 (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1997).
- 2 "Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick," *Contemporary Black Biography*; Hans Johnson and Peggie Rayhawk, *The New Members of Congress Almanac: 105th U.S. Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Almanac Publishing Inc., 1996): 58.
- 3 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 4 *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2001): 815.
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002: 814.